"What's your name, lad, Kirk? We use surnames here, those of us that have them. Our masters were too free with our own. Care to join us? It's not an easy life, but at least you'll be free."

"I'd hoped for a chance," Kirk said slowly. "But would I be welcome? I was...a pleasure slave.

"We know that," Foster answered. "I'm sorry, Kirk, but we saw what that bastard did to you. We couldn't risk springing the trap too early in case there were more like him around. As for what you were--you probably don't know yourself at this point. It won't be held against you. Tyno here was the same and had no more choice than you did."

"Then I'll come." Kirk could scarcely believe his good fortune. Not only had he found the free slaves without even looking for them, but he wouldn't have to undertake the uncertain journey to the mountains alone. It was just a change in plans. Instead of the journey with Spock, it would be a journey to freedom.

"What will you do with him?" he asked, indicating Spock, who looked away in supreme indifference

Foster looked down at the bound figure. "We'll take him with us," he said, "blind him first, just in case he should get away, but that's not likely. Anyway they've butchered enough of us; it's worth the risk to play turnabout."

"I see." Kirk had to swallow back nausea. He could hate to the death--a quick death, such as Spock had given the Pavan, but beyond--blinding, torturing. He felt suddenly cold and weak and Foster caught him as he staggered.

"You sick?"

"I--no--it's just that we travelled all day yesterday, it was so hot, and he wouldn't let me rest..." He leaned on Foster, faking more weakness than he felt. Not sure why.

"Never mind. You'll have the day to rest up. There's little chance of being discovered here and we prefer to travel at night outselves. You'll feel better then."

The slaves made a quick, rough search of their supplies and helped themselves to the dried fruit and trailbread. Kirk supposed it was better than they were used to. They set up a sort of sloppy camp, one or two sheltering together against the heat. Spock lay where he had fallen, and no one made any effort to provide him with shelter or water, even when the noon sun beat down directly. On impulse, to see how far his "freedom" really went, Kirk took a waterskin out to Spock and offered him a drink. The Vulcan turned his head aside.

"Hold his nose and make him drink," some one shouted, "we don't want him to die on us--too soon."

Foster had been watching. He walked over, grabbed Spock's hair and pulled his head back.

"He can drink it or wear it," he said with a gesture.

Kirk let the water splash over the Vulcan's face, washing away the dirt and blood. He had not really expected Spock to drink at his bidding.

The day seemed long to Kirk, but he was in no hurry for the end of it if it meant Spock's mutilation. A clean death, yes, if that was the price of freedom. But torture....

Spock also thought the day long. When he could, he watched the group of slaves, their attempts to befriend Kirk, Kirk's uncertain, but increasing response. As treacherous as he is beautiful, he thought. I thought him content, but it was merely a slave's pretense. Can he be blamed for desiring freedom? An interesting question, but not one he should be considering now. A slave was a slave. A hunting cat taken from the wild could be trained, taught--but never returned to it. They lost the will to fend for themselves. He knew the length of life these slaves could expect--the poverty of it and the fear. He did not want that for Jim. A wise master rewarded obedience and punished defiance until there was no thought. A well trained cat would attack a sehlat to protect its injured master, so should a slave. The interval between command and compliance was the measure of good training--he had neglected much in his indulgence of this slave. And yet bound, under sentence, he still knew that he wanted more from James Kirk than mere obedience. And that was folly, against the creed by which he lived, and it had brought him to his death.

Kirk said he felt well enough to help with the meal the slaves prepared that evening. "I was well trained," he said ruefully. "I served enough spiced wine. For once I'd like to taste it." His suggestion was well received, and he watched the wine take effect, with some satisfaction. Even Spock, with the cold of the night ahead, facing his ordeal, drank without protest. Kirk had no way of knowing, and Spock would not admit, even to himself, that it was not the wine that warmed him, but the touch of one Human hand, the scent of alien flesh....

Spock came slowly awake to realize that he was lying comfortably wrapped in the sleeping bag before a blazing fire. His hands were free, and no time at all seemed to have passed, but he knew at once that they were in a different place. The three beasts were tethered nearby, and Kirk, alone, knelt tending the fire. His vision blurred for a moment, and he recognized the symptom as an aftermath of his head wound. The camping place was familiar, too, and it was two days ride from the oasis where the escaped slaves had overpowered him.

The rustle of movement as he tried to sit up brought Kirk instantly to his side.

"Be careful," he said. An arm slid round his shoulders, supporting him. "Can you see better? Do you remember what happened?"

Spock ignored the question. "Bring me water," he commanded. At the tone, some of the vitality in Kirk's face quietly drained away and his shoulders drooped.

"Yes...master," he said. There was something in the tone that didn't belong there, and Spock reached for the memory of some train of thought he had had earlier, after his capture, but it eluded him. The water cleared his head and memory, though, and he remembered nothing that would explain two day's worth of unconsciousness.

"What happened?" he demanded.

"I--I drugged the renegades."